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ABSTRACT

Coalition building and school restructuring unfortunately do not always occur together. But the two forces can complement each other and combine their resources and strengths. Coalitions are organizations or groups of individuals who share a commitment to a particular issue. Although coalitions involved in school restructuring may in the long run save school districts' resources, initially they require great investments of time and energy. Coalitions can also create friction in school systems where educators or administrators are not prepared for outside input or to share power. Coalition building for school leaders requires reaching out to the community, getting involved in community activities, and recognizing school leaders as community leaders. Coalition builders are often driven by altruism and self-interest and should be prepared to identify specific measures they propose to assist in school restructuring. Maintaining a coalition requires early participation, local solutions, and effective communication. (Contains nine references.) (JPT)

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Community Coalitions to Restructure Schools

By David Peterson - del Mar

This ERIC Digest brings together two large and timely topics: coalition building and school reform. These two subjects are not always paired. Parents, businesses, and others can work with schools in ways that do not restructure schools. And schools can restructure themselves without enlisting the help of others.

But school restructuring commonly involves using the energy and ideas of people outside the schools. Indeed, many restructuring efforts work to break down the walls that separate teacher from parent, classroom from community. Other reformers turn to coalitions out of necessity, because district resources seem too meager to meet the growing challenges that public education faces.

What Are These Coalitions?

Coalitions consist of a broad range of organizations or individuals who share a commitment to a particular issue. Coalition members commit themselves to sharing vital resources on an ongoing basis. Restructuring, too, requires broad and deep change. Conley (1993) defines it as a "fundamental" shift that changes schools' "assumptions, practices, and relationships" to the benefit of "essentially all students."

Coalition building goes beyond mere cooperation. Heaviside and Farris (1989) found that the most common sort of involvement by schools with the larger community involved guest speakers or the provision of demonstrations or equipment. This sort of cooperation between school and community can be very positive, but it does not constitute a coalition.

Coalitions, by definition, entail some sort of structural change. Businesses, colleges, and other community groups or leaders may join with schools to form an organization to increase high school graduates' employability. Or school personnel may form a coalition with representatives from local social-service agencies to better address such problems as poverty, family violence, and juvenile delinquency. The resulting group, or coalition, is both part of the school and part of the larger community.

What Are the Pros and Cons of Coalitions?

There are several advantages to forming coalitions to restructure schools. In the first place, such efforts have the potential to bring a vast amount of energy to bear on problems too large for a single school or even district to overcome. Teachers frustrated by a parent's drug addiction or homelessness can work with the community professionals who specialize in these problems. Administrators struggling to create a curriculum that will better prepare students for the local work force can form a broad range of partnerships with business to both energize the classroom and to extend its boundaries into the broader community.

Yet coalition building should be approached cautiously. Coalitions save districts' resources only in the long run; in the short term they consume vast quantities of time. District officials who are not prepared for a substantial initial outlay may be better off with the status quo.

Coalitions to restructure schools can create friction, particularly within districts. Administrators may not be prepared to accept a decline in formal authority. Educators may resent working with business people; they may feel "that their central purpose should not be to prepare workers," as Conley puts it.

Coalitions for restructuring have great potential power. But leaders should not simply pursue change for the sake of change, and they should seek out collaborators who recognize and respect educators' knowledge and schools' accomplishments.

How Are Coalitions Created?

Liontos (1991) offers three general steps for school leaders trying to build relationships with the broader community: reaching out and initiating contact; getting involved in community activities; and recognizing "that school administrators are, in fact, community leaders." Some school-community coalitions are started by business people wanting to improve student performance or by social workers wishing to upgrade service delivery. But educators begin the majority of school-community coalitions.

Davies (1991) notes that the schools most successful at creating coalitions "will likely be the ones where the felt need is more broadly owned and where substantial numbers of teachers, staff, parents, and other community members can agree on the nature of the problems and needs to be addressed." Such schools are ripe for coalition building.

Leaders in other schools must work to create a sense of felt need

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for reform. The Education Commission of the States (1991) suggests several steps: convening a group of constituents to discuss desired changes; focusing on what students should know and how schools can help them to learn it; encouraging constituents to observe students in class; and developing a statement that identifies this group's vision for the district or school. Collaborative restructuring means opening up the schools to community members' concerns, conversing with them about necessary changes, and working with them to implement agreed-upon reforms.

How Can Members Be Attracted to the Coalition?

Most coalition members are attracted to school restructuring by a mixture of altruism and self-interest. An executive who works closely with a bank operated in Sprague High School in Salem, Oregon, cites "community involvement" as the main reason for her participation, but she hopes that the project will create some good bankers, that "it will give us better employees down the road" (Peterson-del Mar).

Coalition builders should be prepared to cite concrete advantages for helping to restructure schools. Thomas, Hart, and Smith (1989) cite several: better educated employees; the opportunity to improve the general quality of family and community life; use of school resources; and the satisfaction of helping students. Participation in school restructuring places substantial demands on members' time and energy, and people will be understandably reluctant to join a project whose benefits are not spelled out.

Establishing greater rapport and contact with the larger school community is often a first step in recruiting coalition members. Thomas and his coauthors offer tips on how to increase these contacts: inviting parents to school for special events; initiating an active volunteer program; opening the school up to community activities; sending students out into the community; and maintaining an active public relations program. Such steps will increase the community's sense of ownership in the school and create a pool of people likely to participate in substantive reform.

How Are Coalitions Administered and Maintained?

There is no single, established way to administer a coalition. Some have a relatively informal or loose structure. Many, if not most, have bylaws or tax-exempt status. Some are essentially part of the school, even though they include community members. In other cases, such as coalitions with social-service agencies, school or district personnel may be in the minority. The details of a particular coalition's structure and composition depend on its unique requirements, its purpose, and its members' desires.

A coalition's general traits are more easily identified than its particular structure. Peterson - del Mar identifies three key themes for success: early participation, local solutions for local problems, and effective communication.

Early participation by school and nonschool representatives creates a genuine sense of shared power and responsibility in coalitions. True coalition building requires school leaders to listen as well as to lead, to share authority as well as to wield it. It requires that participants genuinely believe that their corporate wisdom and strength exceeds the wisdom and strength of a solitary leader. Coalition building also demands sensitivity to local conditions and needs. Since each community is unique, each will necessarily need to create its own set of priorities and processes.

Effective communication is indispensable in any sort of restructuring. It is particularly crucial when coalitions are included in the reform process. Coalitions for school restructuring bring fundamental changes in lines of authority and responsibility that must be fully discussed and understood before they are implemented (Liontos). Such efforts also, by definition, bring together many types of people from inside and outside the school (Edelstein, Schaeffer, and Kenney 1989). There is great strength in diversity only when these dissimilar people dialogue with each other.

Coalitions can be extremely powerful and effective tools in school restructuring, but only if pursued energetically, skillfully, and openly.

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